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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS

Statement submitted by World Youth Alliance, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

The Equal Sharing of Responsibilities between Women and Men — Recognizing the Value of Informal Work

The pressing issue of the equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women manifests itself in both the developing and the developed world. Today many people, particularly women, engage in unpaid work that contributes greatly to society both economically and socially. Too often this contribution is unrecognized and unappreciated.

Most domestic care giving and other informal work is done by individuals in support of, and for, the benefit of their family. This self-sacrifice shown by family members in every society speaks to the critical importance of family life and the importance of family solidarity. In the developing world in particular, there is no substitute for the educational, health and social services provided by the family.[1]

The informal work of women, men, girls and boys within the domestic or informal sphere contributes to the authentic development of society by fostering conditions for integral human development — characterized by the physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional growth of persons. We call on Member States and the international community as a whole to recognize the tangible value of the informal work of both men and women, in furtherance of the goals of equal sharing of responsibilities.

Women and Responsibility

It is widely acknowledged that at present, women and girls bear the majority of responsibility in domestic work, especially in caring for the elderly, sick or disabled relatives. This is especially true for young women and girls, who care for the whole household following the deaths of parents and/or guardians. Solutions to this problem must focus on the needs of women, men and children, taking into consideration the unique contributions that every person can make to family and professional life.

The World Youth Alliance would like to stress that the achievement of equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women in home care giving should not depend exclusively on the removal of women from home-based care work. Instead, emphasis should be placed on putting women in a position to make the right choices for themselves and their families. Poverty is the biggest "structure of constraint" contributing to the lower participation of women in formal labour.[2] In order to address this, Governments in partnership with civil society should foster conditions that increase the choices available to women and men, including non-traditional educational and vocational opportunities. These would allow men and women flexibility in balancing domestic and professional

* Issued without formal editing.

[1] United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, "*The Social and Political Economy of Care: Contesting Gender and Class Inequalities*", Background Paper (2008), ("...empirical evidence suggests that non-market work remains remarkably and persistently important within the advanced capitalist countries."); *See also*, Figure 2 showing that the amount of non-market work in developing or low-income countries is very high.

[2] Report of the online discussion on the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS, organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women, Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

commitments. With increased choices, women and men can better decide how to meet the needs of their family members and better assess who will provide informal care in the home.

The Value of Informal Work

As both men and women should be supported in their work in the home, equal sharing of responsibilities first requires that we recognize the inherent value of that work in both developed and developing nations.[3] Too often, focus is directed to the fact that professional or formal work has economic benefits exceeding that of informal or domestic work. It is true that these tasks have varying direct economic value, but direct economic value is not the only factor in a determination of value of services. Aside from its social value both to the person being cared for and the person giving care, the economic value of domestic care work is significant and can be determined.

Informal work or work in the home caring for dependents, educating children, and providing food and shelter, can be quantified according to the estimated cost of the state or the market providing equivalent services. Even at a glance, we can perceive that the cost to society of having the state provide these services or the costs to individual families of having the market provide them would be too much to bear. That men and women forego formal employment to provide these important services, is commendable and should be respected and encouraged. Recognition that the family is the fundamental unit of society and that its well-being is directly correlated to economic prosperity should help men and women to realize the importance of sharing responsibilities.[4]

This recognition of the value of such services is essential to encouraging the equal sharing of responsibilities of men and women in the context of the home.[5] Recognition may be manifested not only in policy but also in the cultures of both developed and developing countries. In developing countries, affirming the importance of household work will make it more likely that men and boys will participate in these activities rather than solely professional or formal work.[6] This will increasingly create opportunities for women and girls to pursue their education or enter the workforce.

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[3] Opening Statement to the Expert Group Meeting on the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS, ("...the work carried out by women at household and community levels are not just "chores"...but important responsibilities with significant impact on development at household, community and national levels.") Contrary to opinions expressed in the report of the online discussion on the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS, organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women, informal work is *not* undervalued because *women* perform it. It is undervalued because Government and society in general do not acknowledge its inherent value. A partial solution is to show how much it would cost the state to provide these services.

[4] That men do not value care giving responsibilities in the home is not particular to any hyper masculine trait of men. It is also not solely an economic issue. Society and even women themselves devalue family life and the home-based care that is often required for it to flourish. Men and women will be more likely to share equally in responsibilities when the family is valued as the fundamental unit of flourishing societies.

[5] Report of the online discussion on the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS, organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women, *supra* note 2, at 12 ("I think that as long as the role at home on the one hand and the role of 'parent' on the other are not valued, supported, honored, encouraged and developed, inequalities will always be there to make participation of women 'incomplete.'" *Quote from a participant*).

[6] Id. at 6 ("If men's resistance to changes in gender stereotypes is in part because it is not in their economic self-interest, then raising care returns will increase the willingness of men to share in household responsibilities.") (We would note that respecting household work economically will also show that women themselves value the work and therefore men are more likely to follow suit and share responsibility.)

Many developed nations are experiencing a demographic crisis. Men and women are having a difficult time balancing work and family life. The economic disparity between formal and informal work lead many women to forego or delay childbearing in favor of careers. This demographic crisis can be mitigated by fostering economic conditions that do not discourage men and women from bearing and raising children. Such policies should facilitate parental leave and allow for the choices that individual families make relating to the care and education of their children.[7]

Gender and the Formal Working Environment

When men and women are given increased choices for the provision of informal care, participation in the formal labor market is stronger and more productive. That many women choose to remain in informal care-giving roles despite being given the choice to enter the formal labor market is not always a reflection of constraining structures and gender stereotypes; many women desire to take on the primary care-giving role in their families. However, social structures that limit the choices of women and men with respect to entry into the formal labour market should be re-examined.

Currently, the labor structures of most jobs are designed for a type of employee that has no responsibility in the informal working world.[8] Flexible working arrangements are not common, but could provide women and men with better opportunities to balance work and family life, and share care-giving responsibilities.

Despite the limitations of social and legal structures for many women, informal work in the home does not necessarily lead to decreased participation in the political process or in political life.[9] Formal work often keeps both men and women from being involved in their communities at a grassroots level, which is necessary for effective involvement in the political arena. Women and men who provide care in the home are often more involved with the support systems that directly affect the community: extended family, friends, and local political groups such as educational and parental networks. In particular, new technologies enhance men and women's ability to network and involve themselves in both local and national/international communities from the home.

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[7] Id.

[8] Id. at 14.

[9] For example, Sandra Day O'Connor, the first female justice of the United States Supreme Court, left her career to raise children, and through this was able to the heights of political participation and power. ("Indeed, there's been an implicit assumption that high-powered women who choose to spend time with their little ones will return to the workforce in inferior roles, at best and, more likely, will disappear from the professional landscape forever. As Sandra Day O'Connor's story illustrates, women who opt out can re-launch their careers and, yes, their re-launch might even overshadow their initial professional accomplishments.") Source: Boston Globe (http://ww w.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2006/ 01/23/relaunching_mothers/); Supreme Court History: "From 1960 to 1965, besides being a full-time mother, O'Connor did a variety of volunteer work. She wrote questions for the Arizona bar exam, helped start the state bar's lawyer referral service, sat on the local zoning commission, and served as a member of the Maricopa County Board of Adjustments and Appeals. In 1965 she served as a member of the Governor's Committee on Marriage and Family, worked as an administrative assistant of the Arizona State Hospital and acted as an adviser to the Salvation Army, and volunteered in a school for blacks and Hispanics." http://www.supremecourthistory.org/myweb/justice/o%27connor.htm

Recommendations

1) Member States, in partnership with civil society, should foster the development of cultural programs that affirm the inherent economic and social value of informal work.

2) Member States should promote conditions for gender equality and the equal sharing of domestic responsibilities through poverty alleviation, ensuring access to primary education and secondary education for all, and by strengthening basic healthcare.

3) Member States should create economic conditions that support women and men who are caregivers in the home in order to improve the overall economic and social situation of those families that are poverty-stricken. This can include tax incentives like credits for children and for parents who choose to be caregivers in the home.

4) Member States, in partnership with families and communities, should work to strengthen families, especially highlighting the important role that fathers play in providing care and support.

5) Member States, in partnership with civil society, should promote access to information technologies that will allow men and women to work and educate themselves from the home.

6) Member States should increase the amount of time allocated for parental leave and ensure that both men and women have access to it. Decisions about which spouse should take the parental leave should be made entirely by the spouses.

7) Member States should encourage businesses to restructure the formal work environment so that there is increased flexibility in working hours and work location.